

Practical Ethics

Second Edition

PETER SINGER

*Centre for Human Bioethics
Monash University*



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Practical Ethics

Second Edition

PETER SINGER

*Centre for Human Bioethics
Monash University*



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

"Singer's book is packed with admirably marshaled and detailed information, social, medical, and economic, and has a splendid appendix of notes and references to further reading. The utility of this utilitarian's book to students of its subject can hardly be exaggerated."

– H.L.A. Hart, New York Review of Books

"Peter Singer has provided us with a good example of the fruits of a major and by now established extension of philosophical interest. He succeeds in being straightforward, clear, and forceful without oversimplifying the technical aspects of the problems he discusses or trivializing the underlying philosophical issues."

– The Times Higher Education Supplement

"This book is concentrated fare. The masterly and lively writing, rich with brief and telling examples, is devoted to close reasoning on some basic issues confronting the human community."

– The Humanist

"Excellent and highly provocative."

– Choice

PRACTICAL ETHICS – SECOND EDITION

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Victoria 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1993

First published 1993

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Singer, Peter.

Practical ethics / Peter Singer. — 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-521-43363-0 (hc). — ISBN 0-521-43971-X (pb)

1. Ethics. 2. Social ethics. I. Title.

BJ1012.S49 1993

170—dc20

92-12319
CIP

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-521-43363-0 hardback

ISBN 0-521-43971-X paperback

CONTENTS

Preface

page vii

1	About Ethics	1
2	Equality and Its Implications	16
3	Equality for Animals?	55
4	What's Wrong with Killing?	83
5	Taking Life: Animals	110
6	Taking Life: The Embryo and the Fetus	135
7	Taking Life: Humans	175
8	Rich and Poor	218
9	Insiders and Outsiders	247
10	The Environment	264
11	Ends and Means	289
12	Why Act Morally?	314
	Appendix: On Being Silenced in Germany	337
	Notes, References, and Further Reading	360

Index

381

PREFACE

Practical ethics covers a wide area. We can find ethical ramifications in most of our choices, if we look hard enough. This book does not attempt to cover this whole area. The problems it deals with have been selected on two grounds: their relevance, and the extent to which philosophical reasoning can contribute to a discussion of them.

I regard an ethical issue as relevant if it is one that any thinking person must face. Some of the issues discussed in this book confront us daily: what are our personal responsibilities towards the poor? Are we justified in treating animals as nothing more than machines producing flesh for us to eat? Should we be using paper that is not recycled? And why should we bother about acting in accordance with moral principles anyway? Other problems, like abortion and euthanasia, fortunately are not everyday decisions for most of us; but they are issues that can arise at some time in our lives. They are also issues of current concern about which any active participant in our society's decision-making process needs to reflect.

The extent to which an issue can usefully be discussed philosophically depends on the kind of issue it is. Some issues are controversial largely because there are facts in dispute. For example, whether the release of new organisms created by the use of recombinant DNA ought to be permitted seems to hang largely on whether the organisms pose a serious risk to the environment. Although philosophers may lack the expertise to tackle this question, they may still be able to say something useful about whether it is acceptable to run a given risk of

Preface

environmental damage. In other cases, however, the facts are clear and accepted by both sides; it is conflicting ethical views that give rise to disagreement over what to do. Then the kind of reasoning and analysis that philosophers practise really can make a difference. The issues discussed in this book are ones in which ethical, rather than factual, disagreement determines the positions people take. The potential contribution of philosophers to discussions of these issues is therefore considerable.

This book has played a central role in events that must give pause to anyone who thinks that freedom of thought and expression can be taken for granted in liberal democracies today. Since its first publication in 1979, it has been widely read and used in many courses at universities and colleges. It has been translated into German, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, and Swedish. The response has generally been positive. There are, of course, many who disagree with the arguments presented in the book, but the disagreement has almost always been at the level of reasoned debate. The only exception has been the reaction in German-speaking countries. In Germany, Austria, and Switzerland opposition to the views contained in this book reached such a peak that conferences or lectures at which I was invited to speak have been cancelled, and courses at German universities in which the book was to be used have been subjected to such repeated disruption that they could not continue. For readers interested in further details of this sorry story a fuller account is reprinted as an appendix.

Naturally, the German opposition to this book has made me reflect on whether the views I have expressed really are, as at least some Germans appear to believe, so erroneous or so dangerous that they must not be uttered. Although much of the German opposition is simply misinformed about what I am saying, there is an underlying truth to the claim that the book breaks a taboo – or perhaps more than one taboo. In Germany since the defeat of Hitler it has not been possible openly to

Preface

discuss the question of euthanasia, nor the issue of whether a human life may be so full of misery as not to be worth living. More fundamental still, and not limited to Germany, is the taboo on comparing the value of human and nonhuman lives. In the commotion that followed the cancellation of a conference in Germany at which I had been invited to speak, the German sponsoring organisation, to disassociate itself from my views, passed a series of motions, one of which read: 'The uniqueness of human life forbids any comparison – or more specifically, equation – of human existence with other living beings, with their forms of life or interests.' Comparing, and in some cases equating, the lives of humans and animals is exactly what this book is about; in fact it could be said that if there is any single aspect of this book that distinguishes it from other approaches to such issues as human equality, abortion, euthanasia, and the environment, it is the fact that these topics are approached with a conscious disavowal of any assumption that all members of our own species have, merely because they are members of our species, any distinctive worth or inherent value that puts them above members of other species. The belief in human superiority is a very fundamental one, and it underlies our thinking in many sensitive areas. To challenge it is no trivial matter, and that such a challenge should provoke a strong reaction ought not to surprise us. Nevertheless, once we have understood that the breaching of this taboo on comparing humans and animals is partly responsible for the protests, it becomes clear that there is no going back. For reasons that are developed in subsequent chapters, to prohibit any cross-species comparisons would be philosophically indefensible. It would also make it impossible to overcome the wrongs we are now doing to nonhuman animals, and would reinforce attitudes that have done immense irreparable damage to the environment of this planet that we share with members of other species.

So I have not backed away from the views that have caused so much controversy in German-speaking lands. If these views

Preface

have their dangers, the dangers of attempting to continue to maintain the present crumbling taboos are greater still. Needless to say, many will disagree with what I have to say. Objections and counter-arguments are welcome. Since the days of Plato, philosophy has advanced dialectically as philosophers have offered reasons for disagreeing with the views of other philosophers. Disagreement is good, because it is the way to a more defensible position; the suggestion that the views I have advanced should not even be discussed is, however, a totally different matter, and one that I am quite content to leave to readers, after they have read and reflected upon the chapters that follow.

Though I have not changed my views on the issues that have aroused the most fanatical opposition, this revised edition contains many other changes. I have added two new chapters on important ethical questions that were not covered in the previous edition: Chapter 9 on the refugee question and chapter 10 on the environment. Chapter 2 has a new section on equality and disability. The sections of Chapter 6 on embryo experimentation and fetal tissue use are also new. Every chapter has been reworked, factual material has been updated, and where my position has been misunderstood by my critics, I have tried to make it clearer.

As far as my underlying ethical views are concerned, some of my friends and colleagues will no doubt be distressed to find that countless hours spent discussing these matters with me have served only to reinforce my conviction that the consequentialist approach to ethics taken in the first edition is fundamentally sound. There have been two significant changes to the form of consequentialism espoused. The first is that I make use of the distinction drawn by R. M. Hare, in his book *Moral Thinking*, between two distinct levels of moral reasoning – the everyday intuitive level and the more reflective, critical level. The second is that I have dropped the suggestion – which I advanced rather tentatively in the fifth chapter of the first edition – that one might try to combine both the ‘total’ and ‘prior

Preface

existence’ versions of utilitarianism, applying the former to sentient beings who are not self-conscious and the latter to those who are. I now think that preference utilitarianism draws a sufficiently sharp distinction between these two categories of being to enable us to apply one version of utilitarianism to all sentient beings. Nevertheless, I am still not entirely satisfied with my treatment of this whole question of how we should deal with ethical choices that involve bringing a being or beings into existence. As Chapters 4–7 make clear, the way in which we answer this perplexing question has implications for the issues of abortion, the treatment of severely disabled newborn infants, and for the killing of animals. The period between editions of this book has seen the publication of by far the most intricate and far-sighted analysis to date of this problem: Derek Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons*. Unfortunately, Parfit himself remains baffled by the questions he has raised, and his conclusion is that the search for ‘Theory X’ – a satisfactory way of answering the question – must continue. So perhaps it is hardly to be expected that a satisfactory solution can emerge in this, both slimmer and more wide-ranging, volume.

In writing this book I have made extensive use of my own previously published articles and books. Thus Chapter 3 is based on *Animal Liberation* (New York Review/Random House, 2d edition, 1990), although it takes into account objections made since the book first appeared in 1975. The sections of Chapter 6 on such topics as in vitro fertilisation, the argument from potential, embryo experimentation, and the use of fetal tissue, all draw on work I wrote jointly with Karen Dawson, which was published as ‘IVF and the Argument From Potential’ in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 17 (1988), and in Peter Singer, Helga Kuhse, and others, *Embryo Experimentation* (Cambridge University Press, 1990). In this revised edition, Chapter 7 includes points reached together with Helga Kuhse in working on our much fuller treatment of the issue of euthanasia for

Preface

severely disabled infants, *Should the Baby Live?* (Oxford University Press, 1985). Chapter 8 restates arguments from 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 1 (1972) and from 'Reconsidering the Famine Relief Argument' in Peter Brown and Henry Shue (eds.) *Food Policy: The Responsibility of the United States in the Life and Death Choices* (New York, The Free Press, 1977). Chapter 9 again draws on a co-authored piece, this time written with my wife, Renata Singer, and first published as 'The Ethics of Refugee Policy' in M. Gibney (ed.), *Open Borders? Closed Societies?* (Greenwood Press, New York, 1988). Chapter 10 is based on 'Environmental Values', a chapter that I contributed to Ian Marsh (ed.), *The Environmental Challenge* (Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991). Parts of Chapter 11 draw on my first book, *Democracy and Disobedience* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973).

H. J. McCloskey, Derek Parfit, and Robert Young provided useful comments on a draft version of the first edition of this book. Robert Young's ideas also entered into my thinking at an earlier stage, when we jointly taught a course on these topics at La Trobe University. The chapter on euthanasia, in particular, owes much to his ideas, though he may not agree with everything in it. Going back further still, my interest in ethics was stimulated by H. J. McCloskey, whom I was fortunate to have as a teacher during my undergraduate years; while the mark left by R. M. Hare, who taught me at Oxford, is apparent in the ethical foundations underlying the positions taken in this book. Jeremy Mynott, of Cambridge University Press, encouraged me to write the book and helped to shape and improve it as it went along.

For assistance with the revised edition, I must thank those with whom I have worked jointly on material that has been included in this book: Karen Dawson, Helga Kuhse, and Renata Singer. Helga Kuhse, in particular, has been a close colleague for the past ten years, and during that period I have learned much by discussing most of the topics in this book with her.

Preface

She also read and commented on several chapters of this revised edition. Paola Cavalieri gave me detailed comments and criticism on the entire draft, and I thank her for suggesting several improvements. There are, of course, many others who have challenged what I wrote in the first edition and forced me to think about these issues again, but to thank them all is impossible, and to thank a few would be unjust. This time it was Terence Moore, at Cambridge University Press, whose enthusiasm for the book provided the stimulus for me to carry out the revisions.

To give an uncluttered text, the notes, references, and suggested further reading are grouped together at the end of the book.

ABOUT ETHICS

THIS book is about practical ethics, that is, the application of ethics or morality – I shall use the words interchangeably – to practical issues like the treatment of ethnic minorities, equality for women, the use of animals for food and research, the preservation of the natural environment, abortion, euthanasia, and the obligation of the wealthy to help the poor. No doubt the reader will want to get on to these issues without delay; but there are some preliminaries that must be dealt with at the start. In order to have a useful discussion within ethics, it is necessary to say a little *about* ethics, so that we have a clear understanding of what we are doing when we discuss ethical questions. This first chapter therefore sets the stage for the remainder of the book. In order to prevent it from growing into an entire volume itself, I have kept it brief. If at times it is dogmatic, that is because I cannot take the space properly to consider all the different conceptions of ethics that might be opposed to the one I shall defend; but this chapter will at least serve to reveal the assumptions on which the remainder of the book is based.

WHAT ETHICS IS NOT

Some people think that morality is now out of date. They regard morality as a system of nasty puritanical prohibitions, mainly designed to stop people having fun. Traditional moralists claim to be the defenders of morality in general, but they are really defending a particular moral code. They have been allowed to

preempt the field to such an extent that when a newspaper headline reads BISHOP ATTACKS DECLINING MORAL STANDARDS, we expect to read yet again about promiscuity, homosexuality, pornography, and so on, and not about the puny amounts we give as overseas aid to poorer nations, or our reckless indifference to the natural environment of our planet.

So the first thing to say about ethics is that it is not a set of prohibitions particularly concerned with sex. Even in the era of AIDS, sex raises no unique moral issues at all. Decisions about sex may involve considerations of honesty, concern for others, prudence, and so on, but there is nothing special about sex in this respect, for the same could be said of decisions about driving a car. (In fact, the moral issues raised by driving a car, both from an environmental and from a safety point of view, are much more serious than those raised by sex.) Accordingly, this book contains no discussion of sexual morality. There are more important ethical issues to be considered.

Second, ethics is not an ideal system that is noble in theory but no good in practice. The reverse of this is closer to the truth: an ethical judgment that is no good in practice must suffer from a theoretical defect as well, for the whole point of ethical judgments is to guide practice.

Some people think that ethics is inapplicable to the real world because they regard it as a system of short and simple rules like 'Do not lie', 'Do not steal', and 'Do not kill'. It is not surprising that those who hold this view of ethics should also believe that ethics is not suited to life's complexities. In unusual situations, simple rules conflict; and even when they do not, following a rule can lead to disaster. It may normally be wrong to lie, but if you were living in Nazi Germany and the Gestapo came to your door looking for Jews, it would surely be right to deny the existence of the Jewish family hiding in your attic.

Like the failure of a restrictive sexual morality, the failure of an ethic of simple rules must not be taken as a failure of ethics as a whole. It is only a failure of one view of ethics, and not

even an irremediable failure of that view. The deontologists – those who think that ethics is a system of rules – can rescue their position by finding more complicated and more specific rules that do not conflict with each other, or by ranking the rules in some hierarchical structure to resolve conflicts between them. Moreover, there is a long-standing approach to ethics that is quite untouched by the complexities that make simple rules difficult to apply. This is the consequentialist view. Consequentialists start not with moral rules but with goals. They assess actions by the extent to which they further these goals. The best-known, though not the only, consequentialist theory is utilitarianism. The classical utilitarian regards an action as right if it produces as much or more of an increase in the happiness of all affected by it than any alternative action, and wrong if it does not.

The consequences of an action vary according to the circumstances in which it is performed. Hence a utilitarian can never properly be accused of a lack of realism, or of a rigid adherence to ideals in defiance of practical experience. The utilitarian will judge lying bad in some circumstances and good in others, depending on its consequences.

Third, ethics is not something intelligible only in the context of religion. I shall treat ethics as entirely independent of religion.

Some theists say that ethics cannot do without religion because the very meaning of 'good' is nothing other than 'what God approves'. Plato refuted a similar claim more than two thousand years ago by arguing that if the gods approve of some actions it must be because those actions are good, in which case it cannot be the gods' approval that makes them good. The alternative view makes divine approval entirely arbitrary: if the gods had happened to approve of torture and disapprove of helping our neighbours, torture would have been good and helping our neighbours bad. Some modern theists have attempted to extricate themselves from this type of dilemma by maintaining that God is good and so could not possibly approve

of torture; but these theists are caught in a trap of their own making, for what can they possibly mean by the assertion that God is good? That God is approved of by God?

Traditionally, the more important link between religion and ethics was that religion was thought to provide a reason for doing what is right, the reason being that those who are virtuous will be rewarded by an eternity of bliss while the rest roast in hell. Not all religious thinkers have accepted this argument: Immanuel Kant, a most pious Christian, scorned anything that smacked of a self-interested motive for obeying the moral law. We must obey it, he said, for its own sake. Nor do we have to be Kantians to dispense with the motivation offered by traditional religion. There is a long line of thought that finds the source of ethics in the attitudes of benevolence and sympathy for others that most people have. This is, however, a complex topic, and since it is the subject of the final chapter of this book I shall not pursue it here. It is enough to say that our everyday observation of our fellow human beings clearly shows that ethical behaviour does not require belief in heaven and hell.

The fourth, and last, claim about ethics that I shall deny in this opening chapter is that ethics is relative or subjective. At least, I shall deny these claims in some of the senses in which they are often made. This point requires a more extended discussion than the other three.

Let us take first the oft-asserted idea that ethics is relative to the society one happens to live in. This is true in one sense and false in another. It is true that, as we have already seen in discussing consequentialism, actions that are right in one situation because of their good consequences may be wrong in another situation because of their bad consequences. Thus casual sexual intercourse may be wrong when it leads to the existence of children who cannot be adequately cared for, and not wrong when, because of the existence of effective contraception, it does not lead to reproduction at all. But this is only a superficial form of relativism. While it suggests that the applicability

of a specific principle like 'Casual sex is wrong' may be relative to time and place, it says nothing against such a principle being objectively valid in specific circumstances, or against the universal applicability of a more general principle like 'Do what increases happiness and reduces suffering.'

The more fundamental form of relativism became popular in the nineteenth century when data on the moral beliefs and practices of far-flung societies began pouring in. To the strict reign of Victorian prudery the knowledge that there were places where sexual relations between unmarried people were regarded as perfectly wholesome brought the seeds of a revolution in sexual attitudes. It is not surprising that to some the new knowledge suggested, not merely that the moral code of nineteenth-century Europe was not objectively valid, but that no moral judgment can do more than reflect the customs of the society in which it is made.

Marxists adapted this form of relativism to their own theories. The ruling ideas of each period, they said, are the ideas of its ruling class, and so the morality of a society is relative to its dominant economic class, and thus indirectly relative to its economic basis. So they triumphantly refuted the claims of feudal and bourgeois morality to objective, universal validity. But this raises a problem: if all morality is relative, what is so special about communism? Why side with the proletariat rather than the bourgeoisie?

Engels dealt with this problem in the only way possible, by abandoning relativism in favour of the more limited claim that the morality of a society divided into classes will always be relative to the ruling class, although the morality of a society without class antagonisms could be a 'really human' morality. This is no longer relativism at all. Nevertheless, Marxism, in a confused sort of way, still provides the impetus for a lot of woolly relativist ideas.

The problem that led Engels to abandon relativism defeats ordinary ethical relativism as well. Anyone who has thought

through a difficult ethical decision knows that being told what our society thinks we ought to do does not settle the quandary. We have to reach our own decision. The beliefs and customs we were brought up with may exercise great influence on us, but once we start to reflect upon them we can decide whether to act in accordance with them, or to go against them.

The opposite view – that ethics is always relative to a particular society – has most implausible consequences. If our society disapproves of slavery, while another society approves of it, we have no basis to choose between these conflicting views. Indeed, on a relativist analysis there is really no conflict – when I say slavery is wrong I am really only saying that my society disapproves of slavery, and when the slaveowners from the other society say that slavery is right, they are only saying that their society approves of it. Why argue? Obviously we could both be speaking the truth.

Worse still, the relativist cannot satisfactorily account for the nonconformist. If 'slavery is wrong' means 'my society disapproves of slavery', then someone who lives in a society that does not disapprove of slavery is, in claiming that slavery is wrong, making a simple factual error. An opinion poll could demonstrate the error of an ethical judgment. Would-be reformers are therefore in a parlous situation: when they set out to change the ethical views of their fellow-citizens they are *necessarily* mistaken; it is only when they succeed in winning most of the society over to their own views that those views become right.

These difficulties are enough to sink ethical relativism; ethical subjectivism at least avoids making nonsense of the valiant efforts of would-be moral reformers, for it makes ethical judgments depend on the approval or disapproval of the person making the judgment, rather than that person's society. There are other difficulties, though, that at least some forms of ethical subjectivism cannot overcome.

If those who say that ethics is subjective mean by this that

when I say that cruelty to animals is wrong I am really only saying that I disapprove of cruelty to animals, they are faced with an aggravated form of one of the difficulties of relativism: the inability to account for ethical disagreement. What was true for the relativist of disagreement between people from different societies is for the subjectivist true of disagreement between any two people. I say cruelty to animals is wrong: someone else says it is not wrong. If this means that I disapprove of cruelty to animals and someone else does not, both statements may be true and so there is nothing to argue about.

Other theories often described as 'subjectivist' are not open to this objection. Suppose someone maintains that ethical judgments are neither true nor false because they do not describe anything – neither objective moral facts, nor one's own subjective states of mind. This theory might hold that, as C. L. Stevenson suggested, ethical judgments express attitudes, rather than describe them, and we disagree about ethics because we try, by expressing our own attitude, to bring our listeners to a similar attitude. Or it might be, as R. M. Hare has urged, that ethical judgments are prescriptions and therefore more closely related to commands than to statements of fact. On this view we disagree because we care about what people do. Those features of ethical argument that imply the existence of objective moral standards can be explained away by maintaining that this is some kind of error – perhaps the legacy of the belief that ethics is a God-given system of law, or perhaps just another example of our tendency to objectify our personal wants and preferences. J. L. Mackie has defended this view.

Provided they are carefully distinguished from the crude form of subjectivism that sees ethical judgments as descriptions of the speaker's attitudes, these are plausible accounts of ethics. In their denial of a realm of ethical facts that is part of the real world, existing quite independently of us, they are no doubt correct; but does it follow from this that ethical judgments are immune from criticism, that there is no role for reason or ar-

gument in ethics, and that, from the standpoint of reason, any ethical judgment is as good as any other? I do not think it does, and none of the three philosophers referred to in the previous paragraph denies reason and argument a role in ethics, though they disagree as to the significance of this role.

This issue of the role that reason can play in ethics is the crucial point raised by the claim that ethics is subjective. The non-existence of a mysterious realm of objective ethical facts does not imply the non-existence of ethical reasoning. It may even help, since if we could arrive at ethical judgments only by intuiting these strange ethical facts, ethical argument would be more difficult still. So what has to be shown to put practical ethics on a sound basis is that ethical reasoning is possible. Here the temptation is to say simply that the proof of the pudding lies in the eating, and the proof that reasoning is possible in ethics is to be found in the remaining chapters of this book; but this is not entirely satisfactory. From a theoretical point of view it is unsatisfactory because we might find ourselves reasoning about ethics without really understanding how this can happen; and from a practical point of view it is unsatisfactory because our reasoning is more likely to go astray if we lack a grasp of its foundations. I shall therefore attempt to say something about how we can reason in ethics.

WHAT ETHICS IS: ONE VIEW

What follows is a sketch of a view of ethics that allows reason an important role in ethical decisions. It is not the only possible view of ethics, but it is a plausible view. Once again, however, I shall have to pass over qualifications and objections worth a chapter to themselves. To those who think these undiscussed objections defeat the position I am advancing, I can only say, again, that this whole chapter may be treated as no more than a statement of the assumptions on which this book is based. In

that way it will at least assist in giving a clear view of what I take ethics to be.

What is it to make a moral judgment, or to argue about an ethical issue, or to live according to ethical standards? How do moral judgments differ from other practical judgments? Why do we regard a woman's decision to have an abortion as raising an ethical issue, but not her decision to change her job? What is the difference between a person who lives by ethical standards and one who doesn't?

All these questions are related, so we only need to consider one of them; but to do this we need to say something about the nature of ethics. Suppose that we have studied the lives of a number of different people, and we know a lot about what they do, what they believe, and so on. Can we then decide which of them are living by ethical standards and which are not?

We might think that the way to proceed here is to find out who believes it wrong to lie, cheat, steal, and so on and does not do any of these things, and who has no such beliefs, and shows no such restraint in their actions. Then those in the first group would be living according to ethical standards and those in the second group would not be. But this procedure mistakenly assimilates two distinctions: the first is the distinction between living according to (what we judge to be) the right ethical standards and living according to (what we judge to be) mistaken ethical standards; the second is the distinction between living according to some ethical standards, and living according to no ethical standards at all. Those who lie and cheat, but do not believe what they are doing to be wrong, may be living according to ethical standards. They may believe, for any of a number of possible reasons, that it is right to lie, cheat, steal, and so on. They are not living according to conventional ethical standards, but they may be living according to some other ethical standards.

This first attempt to distinguish the ethical from the non-

ethical was mistaken, but we can learn from our mistakes. We found that we must concede that those who hold unconventional ethical beliefs are still living according to ethical standards, *if they believe, for any reason, that it is right to do as they are doing.* The italicised condition gives us a clue to the answer we are seeking. The notion of living according to ethical standards is tied up with the notion of defending the way one is living, of giving a reason for it, of justifying it. Thus people may do all kinds of things we regard as wrong, yet still be living according to ethical standards, if they are prepared to defend and justify what they do. We may find the justification inadequate, and may hold that the actions are wrong, but the attempt at justification, whether successful or not, is sufficient to bring the person's conduct within the domain of the ethical as opposed to the non-ethical. When, on the other hand, people cannot put forward any justification for what they do, we may reject their claim to be living according to ethical standards, even if what they do is in accordance with conventional moral principles.

We can go further. If we are to accept that a person is living according to ethical standards, the justification must be of a certain kind. For instance, a justification in terms of self-interest alone will not do. When Macbeth, contemplating the murder of Duncan, admits that only 'vaulting ambition' drives him to do it, he is admitting that the act cannot be justified ethically. 'So that I can be king in his place' is not a weak attempt at an ethical justification for assassination; it is not the sort of reason that counts as an ethical justification at all. Self-interested acts must be shown to be compatible with more broadly based ethical principles if they are to be ethically defensible, for the notion of ethics carries with it the idea of something bigger than the individual. If I am to defend my conduct on ethical grounds, I cannot point only to the benefits it brings me. I must address myself to a larger audience.

From ancient times, philosophers and moralists have ex-

pressed the idea that ethical conduct is acceptable from a point of view that is somehow universal. The 'Golden Rule' attributed to Moses, to be found in the book of Leviticus and subsequently repeated by Jesus, tells us to go beyond our own personal interests and 'love thy neighbour as thyself' – in other words, give the same weight to the interests of others as one gives to one's own interests. The same idea of putting oneself in the position of another is involved in the other Christian formulation of the commandment, that we do to others as we would have them do to us. The Stoics held that ethics derives from a universal natural law. Kant developed this idea into his famous formula: 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.' Kant's theory has itself been modified and developed by R. M. Hare, who sees universalisability as a logical feature of moral judgments. The eighteenth-century British philosophers Hutcheson, Hume, and Adam Smith appealed to an imaginary 'impartial spectator' as the test of a moral judgment, and this theory has its modern version in the Ideal Observer theory. Utilitarians, from Jeremy Bentham to J. J. C. Smart, take it as axiomatic that in deciding moral issues 'each counts for one and none for more than one'; while John Rawls, a leading contemporary critic of utilitarianism, incorporates essentially the same axiom into his own theory by deriving basic ethical principles from an imaginary choice in which those choosing do not know whether they will be the ones who gain or lose by the principles they select. Even Continental European philosophers like the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre and the critical theorist Jürgen Habermas, who differ in many ways from their English-speaking colleagues – and from each other – agree that ethics is in some sense universal.

One could argue endlessly about the merits of each of these characterisations of the ethical; but what they have in common is more important than their differences. They agree that an ethical principle cannot be justified in relation to any partial or sectional group. Ethics takes a universal point of view. This does

not mean that a particular ethical judgment must be universally applicable. Circumstances alter causes, as we have seen. What it does mean is that in making ethical judgments we go beyond our own likes and dislikes. From an ethical point of view, the fact that it is I who benefit from, say, a more equal distribution of income and you who lose by it, is irrelevant. Ethics requires us to go beyond 'I' and 'you' to the universal law, the universalisable judgment, the standpoint of the impartial spectator or ideal observer, or whatever we choose to call it.

Can we use this universal aspect of ethics to derive an ethical theory that will give us guidance about right and wrong? Philosophers from the Stoics to Hare and Rawls have attempted this. No attempt has met with general acceptance. The problem is that if we describe the universal aspect of ethics in bare, formal terms, a wide range of ethical theories, including quite irreconcilable ones, are compatible with this notion of universality; if, on the other hand, we build up our description of the universal aspect of ethics so that it leads us ineluctably to one particular ethical theory, we shall be accused of smuggling our own ethical beliefs into our definition of the ethical – and this definition was supposed to be broad enough, and neutral enough, to encompass all serious candidates for the status of 'ethical theory'. Since so many others have failed to overcome this obstacle to deducing an ethical theory from the universal aspect of ethics, it would be foolhardy to attempt to do so in a brief introduction to a work with a quite different aim. Nevertheless I shall propose something only a little less ambitious. The universal aspect of ethics, I suggest, does provide a persuasive, although not conclusive, reason for taking a broadly utilitarian position.

My reason for suggesting this is as follows. In accepting that ethical judgments must be made from a universal point of view, I am accepting that my own interests cannot, simply because they are my interests, count more than the interests of anyone else. Thus my very natural concern that my own interests be

looked after must, when I think ethically, be extended to the interests of others. Now, imagine that I am trying to decide between two possible courses of action – perhaps whether to eat all the fruits I have collected myself, or to share them with others. Imagine, too, that I am deciding in a complete ethical vacuum, that I know nothing of any ethical considerations – I am, we might say, in a pre-ethical stage of thinking. How would I make up my mind? One thing that would be still relevant would be how the possible courses of action will affect my interests. Indeed, if we define 'interests' broadly enough, so that we count anything people desire as in their interests (unless it is incompatible with another desire or desires), then it would seem that at this pre-ethical stage, *only one's own interests* can be relevant to the decision.

Suppose I then begin to think ethically, to the extent of recognising that my own interests cannot count for more, simply because they are my own, than the interests of others. In place of my own interests, I now have to take into account the interests of all those affected by my decision. This requires me to weigh up all these interests and adopt the course of action most likely to maximise the interests of those affected. Thus at least at some level in my moral reasoning I must choose the course of action that has the best consequences, on balance, for all affected. (I say 'at some level in my moral reasoning' because, as we shall see later, there are utilitarian reasons for believing that we ought not to try to calculate these consequences for every ethical decision we make in our daily lives, but only in very unusual circumstances, or perhaps when we are reflecting on our choice of general principles to guide us in future. In other words, in the specific example given, at first glance one might think it obvious that sharing the fruit that I have gathered has better consequences for all affected than not sharing them. This may in the end also be the best general principle for us all to adopt, but before we can have grounds for believing this to be the case, we must also consider whether the effect of a general

practice of sharing gathered fruits will benefit all those affected, by bringing about a more equal distribution, or whether it will reduce the amount of food gathered, because some will cease to gather anything if they know that they will get sufficient from their share of what others gather.)

The way of thinking I have outlined is a form of utilitarianism. It differs from classical utilitarianism in that 'best consequences' is understood as meaning what, on balance, furthers the interests of those affected, rather than merely what increases pleasure and reduces pain. (It has, however, been suggested that classical utilitarians like Bentham and John Stuart Mill used 'pleasure' and 'pain' in a broad sense that allowed them to include achieving what one desired as a 'pleasure' and the reverse as a 'pain'. If this interpretation is correct, the difference between classical utilitarianism and utilitarianism based on interests disappears.)

What does this show? It does not show that utilitarianism can be deduced from the universal aspect of ethics. There are other ethical ideals – like individual rights, the sanctity of life, justice, purity, and so on – that are universal in the required sense, and are, at least in some versions, incompatible with utilitarianism. It does show that we very swiftly arrive at an initially utilitarian position once we apply the universal aspect of ethics to simple, pre-ethical decision making. This, I believe, places the onus of proof on those who seek to go beyond utilitarianism. The utilitarian position is a minimal one, a first base that we reach by universalising self-interested decision making. We cannot, if we are to think ethically, refuse to take this step. If we are to be persuaded that we should go beyond utilitarianism and accept non-utilitarian moral rules or ideals, we need to be provided with good reasons for taking this further step. Until such reasons are produced, we have some grounds for remaining utilitarians.

This tentative argument for utilitarianism corresponds to the way in which I shall discuss practical issues in this book. I am inclined to hold a utilitarian position, and to some extent the

book may be taken as an attempt to indicate how a consistent utilitarianism would deal with a number of controversial problems. But I shall not take utilitarianism as the only ethical position worth considering. I shall try to show the bearing of other views, of theories of rights, of justice, of the sanctity of life, and so on, on the problems discussed. In this way readers will be able to come to their own conclusions about the relative merits of utilitarian and non-utilitarian approaches, and about the whole issue of the role of reason and argument in ethics.

EQUALITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

THE BASIS OF EQUALITY

THE present century has seen dramatic changes in moral attitudes. Most of these changes are still controversial. Abortion, almost everywhere prohibited thirty years ago, is now legal in many countries (though it is still opposed by substantial and respected sections of the population). The same is true of changes in attitudes to sex outside marriage, homosexuality, pornography, euthanasia, and suicide. Great as the changes have been, no new consensus has been reached. The issues remain controversial and it is possible to defend either side without jeopardising one's intellectual or social standing.

Equality seems to be different. The change in attitudes to inequality – especially racial inequality – has been no less sudden and dramatic than the change in attitudes to sex, but it has been more complete. Racist assumptions shared by most Europeans at the turn of the century are now totally unacceptable, at least in public life. A poet could not now write of 'lesser breeds without the law', and retain – indeed enhance – his reputation, as Rudyard Kipling did in 1897. This does not mean that there are no longer any racists, but only that they must disguise their racism if their views and policies are to have any chance of general acceptance. Even South Africa has abandoned apartheid. The principle that all humans are equal is now part of the prevailing political and ethical orthodoxy. But what, exactly, does it mean and why do we accept it?

Once we go beyond the agreement that blatant forms of racial

Equality and Its Implications

discrimination are wrong, once we question the basis of the principle that all humans are equal and seek to apply this principle to particular cases, the consensus starts to weaken. One sign of this was the furor that occurred during the 1970s over the claims made by Arthur Jensen, professor of educational psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and H. J. Eysenck, professor of psychology at the University of London, about genetically based variations in intelligence between different races. Many of the most forceful opponents of Jensen and Eysenck assume that these claims, if sound, would justify racial discrimination. Are they right? Similar questions can be asked about research into differences between males and females.

Another issue requiring us to think about the principle of equality is 'affirmative action'. Some philosophers and lawyers have argued that the principle of equality requires that when allocating jobs or university places we should favour members of disadvantaged minorities. Others have contended that the same principle of equality rules out any discrimination on racial grounds, whether for or against the worst-off members of society.

We can only answer these questions if we are clear about what it is we intend to say, and can justifiably say, when we assert that all humans are equal – hence the need for an inquiry into the ethical foundations of the principle of equality.

When we say that all humans are equal, irrespective of race or sex, what exactly are we claiming? Racists, sexists, and other opponents of equality have often pointed out that, by whatever test we choose, it simply is not true that all humans are equal. Some are tall, some are short; some are good at mathematics, others are poor at it; some can run 100 metres in ten seconds, some take fifteen or twenty; some would never intentionally hurt another being, others would kill a stranger for \$100 if they could get away with it; some have emotional lives that touch the heights of ecstasy and the depths of despair, while others